

Tribute to Professor David Williams II

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All of us have known people who, simply by their presence, made us better. For the thirty years that I knew him, David Williams played that role in my life.

During my first term as Ohio State president (1990–97), I quickly realized that I needed to have a strong voice in support of diversity and inclusion, as the Ohio State campus was riven with problems and tensions facing, particularly, our African American community. I started to search for someone who had a strong commitment to minority affairs and who could speak truth to power. David Williams's name was given to me. David, at the time, was a distinguished member of our law faculty. After meeting with him, I knew that David had greatness and uncanny leadership ability. But he did not want to become a University administrator. Finally, while he was serving as a faculty leader at the University's Oxford program, I called him at a pub in Oxford and begged him to come back and lead the minority division at the University. He reluctantly accepted.

What I immediately learned about David was that he was not simply a powerful voice for good, but he was an unusually gifted administrator. I soon realized that he was bigger than the task at hand. And David was a big man physically who, when he was in the room, you knew he was there. As an aside, he always played a deceptive role of appearing to be somewhat unkempt and even a bit sloppy, which gave our students comfort, but which deceived others who thought they could get something past him.

I asked David to assume ever-wider assignments. Ultimately, he became Vice President for Student Affairs and had major responsibility for the University's athletic program. Under David's leadership, we hired Andy Geiger as our Athletic Director, and the rest is history. Ohio State quickly regained its place as one of the premier athletic programs in the country.

I left Ohio State in 1997 to assume the presidency of Brown University. I asked David if he would join me. I can still remember him looking at me in only the way that he could look at anyone, smiling, and saying, "Do I look like I belong in the Ivy League?" But three years later when I accepted the chancellorship at Vanderbilt University in 2000, I was able to persuade David and his family to join me. David came as Vice Chancellor and General Counsel. He and I started on the same day, August 1, 2000. I can remember well the first time our Board of Trust caught a glimpse of David, which gave some of them heartburn. David was the first African American Vice Chancellor at Vanderbilt. Breaking the color barrier was very comfortable for David. At that southern institution, with its complicated history regarding race, not only did David break ground as the first African American Vice Chancellor, he quickly showed himself to be a leader willing to stand up and speak out for what was right.

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As at Ohio State, I realized that David was a brilliant utility infielder. So, I again made David Vice Chancellor for Student Life as well as University General Counsel. I then placed athletics under David. As you can imagine, for Vanderbilt, a highly selective and small institution, playing in the Southeastern Conference was an enormous challenge. But David insisted that our greatest strength was to emphasize the “student” in student-athlete. Too often, college athletics stands apart from the core higher education mission. At Vanderbilt, David helped to change that by ensuring that student-athletes received a well-rounded education. For example, his experiences teaching abroad convinced him that student-athletes could benefit from international travel. Today, Vanderbilt athletes enjoy opportunities to study abroad, hold internships, and take part in other enriching activities that few, if any, other student-athletes in the country enjoy.

Unsurprisingly, all the changes that David instigated have paid off, bringing the student-athlete graduation rate in line with that of other students at Vanderbilt and helping many of those student-athletes gain spots in graduate and professional schools. And, I can also say that Vanderbilt has enjoyed an unparalleled level of success in winning national championships in baseball, bowling, and women’s tennis and has become much more competitive in the SEC.

David also worked hard to educate Vanderbilt students, faculty, and staff about the University’s past by honoring trailblazers such as Perry Wallace and Godfrey Dillard, Vanderbilt’s first black student-athletes and the first black players in the Southeastern Conference.

Years before Confederate monuments became a major national issue, David helped lead a long battle to rename Vanderbilt’s Confederate Memorial Hall. I remember that shortly after we both arrived at Vanderbilt, David said that as long as there was a building on campus with the Confederate name on it, we would never really, truly be able to make our minority students, faculty, and staff feel comfortable.

Making the change was a no-brainer to me, but the United Daughters of the Confederacy—who originally donated the building to Peabody College, which Vanderbilt later acquired—saw things differently. As I mentioned at David’s memorial service, I gave him the daunting task of explaining our position to the Daughters of the Confederacy face-to-face.

“Either you will charm them or scare the hell out of them,” I joked. In truth, David’s open and empathetic nature helped him to advance understanding on both sides.

As he later said: “The thing that was most interesting to me was, though we had a totally different view, in most cases we were able to remain friends. I had a better understanding of where they were coming from, and they had a better understanding of where I was coming from.” The lawsuit’s progress through the court delayed progress on the official renaming, but Memorial Hall stands today as one of the many monuments to David’s integrity and courage.

Those same qualities made him my most trusted advisor and one of my closest and dearest friends. He always embraced me as a member of his family. His wife, Gail, who in and of herself is a force of nature, along with his children, were very much the center of David's life. His devotion to his work was outweighed only by his love for his family and by the love he held for so many of his friends.

Over my forty years as a University president, I have learned that fulfillment comes from living with sincerity and from reaching always toward growth and betterment. On that paramount lesson, David Williams was and will always remain one of my most powerful teachers.